

NEWS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

# Harvard receives \$20M gift for Islamic Studies Program

Prince Alwaleed: 'Bridging the understanding between East and West is important for peace and tolerance'

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Other recent gifts of Prince Alwaleed's are funding for housing for the poor and a \$19 million donation to tsunami victims.

Harvard University Monday (Dec. 12) announced the creation of a University-wide program on Islamic studies, made possible by a \$20 million gift from Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Bin Abdulaziz Alsaud. The new program will build on Harvard's strong commitment to the study of the religious traditions of the world. It will also augment Harvard's existing strength by increasing

the number of faculty focused on Islamic studies, providing additional support to graduate students, and making rare Islamic textual sources available in digital format.

“We are very grateful to Prince Alwaleed for his generous gift to Harvard,” said President Lawrence H. Summers. “This program will enable us to recruit additional faculty of the highest caliber, adding to our strong team of professors who are focusing on this important area of scholarship.”

Islam represents one of the world’s great religious and cultural traditions, one that has spread far beyond its historical roots in the Middle East to encompass diverse populations and ethnic groups in Asia, Africa, Europe, and America.

“I am pleased to support Islamic studies at Harvard and I hope that this program will enable generations of students and scholars to gain a thorough understanding of Islam and its role both in the past and in today’s world,” Prince Alwaleed said. “Bridging the understanding between East and West is important for peace and tolerance.”

Scholarship on the Islamic tradition at Harvard currently encompasses a broad range of disciplines, from religious studies, history, and law, to art and literature. This gift will make it possible to add strength in important disciplines such as the history of science and new areas of study, such as Islamic Inner-Asian, Southeast Asian, or South Asian studies. “For a university with global aspirations, it is critical that Harvard have a strong program on Islam that is worldwide and interdisciplinary in scope,” said Harvard University Provost Steven E. Hyman, who will coordinate the new program’s implementation.

Harvard University has the largest assemblage in the English-speaking world of specialists in one or another aspect of Islamic tradition, including such scholars as Gurney Professor of History Roy P. Mottahedeh, a major Islamic social historian; Professor of Islamic Religious Studies Baber Johansen, a leading specialist in Islamic law; and Jewett Professor of Arabic Wolfhart Heinrichs, a pre-eminent literary expert. However, the primary strength of Islamic studies at Harvard lies both in the coverage of a broad range of fields of study in the early and middle periods of Islamic history (ca. A.D. 600 – 1800), particularly in the greater Middle East, and also in the truly exceptional collections of primary and secondary sources within the Harvard University library system. Harvard’s capacity in non – Middle Eastern and modern Islamic studies does not match its depth in traditional Islamic studies, and the new gift will do much to remedy this.

In order to represent more fully the global reach of Islam past and present, Harvard wants to expand its coverage of the vast field of Islamic studies. Building on existing strengths, a larger concentration of faculty focused on Islam and an increased number of the most promising graduate students in this area will make Islamic studies a more visible and important part of the curricula of Harvard’s faculties. This will improve its coverage of the historical, religious, and cultural aspects of Islamic life around the world and throughout history.

The Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Islamic Studies Program at Harvard University will bring together faculty, students, and researchers from across the University and will be housed within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) in close coordination with Harvard Divinity School. The program will establish four new faculty positions, enabling Harvard to attract a group of additional outstanding academics from a broad range of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. An endowed chair known as the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Professor in Contemporary Islamic Thought and Life will be created, and an additional endowment fund will be established to support three senior professorships in other areas of Islamic studies. The program also will provide support for research, tuition, fees, and stipends for graduate students.

In addition, the program will launch an initiative known as the Islamic Heritage Project, which will preserve and digitize historically significant Islamic materials and make vast quantities of the resulting images – including digitized texts of the classics of the Islamic tradition – available via the Internet. Among other things, this initiative will help guard against the potential loss of important texts, which could be endangered under a variety of circumstances, as demonstrated by the recent tragic destruction of manuscripts in Iraq and Bosnia and the neglect and deterioration of manuscript libraries around the world.

Currently, Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences offers programs in Indo-Muslim culture, Arabic and Islamic studies, and Islamic art, and the FAS Center for Middle Eastern Studies publishes a journal on the Middle East and the world of Islam. Harvard Law School's Islamic Legal Studies Program advances knowledge and understanding of Islamic law. At the Design School, the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture promotes research and teaching on Islamic art, architecture, and urbanism. The Divinity School has been building its faculty in Islamic studies, and since 2000 has on three occasions helped its students host a conference titled "Islam in America" to explore the role of Islam in the American consciousness. As Harvard Islamic religion scholar William A. Graham, who is the Murray A. Albertson Professor of Middle Eastern Studies, John Lord O'Brian Professor of Divinity, and dean of the Faculty of Divinity, pointed out, "The new program will build on a robust platform of Islamic studies that has developed over several decades across the University."

William C. Kirby, dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and Edith and Benjamin Geisinger Professor of History, commented, "As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, a sophisticated understanding of world religions and cultures is critical to being an educated person in the 21st century." Islam is the religion of roughly 20 percent of the world's population. Muslims make up a majority of the populations in more than 30 countries, and the religion continues to grow worldwide. Accordingly, student interest in Islamic studies is increasing, suggesting a demand for expanded programming in this area. Since the Faculty of Arts and Sciences launched a Core Curriculum course titled "Understanding Islam and Contemporary Muslim Societies" in 1988, the course has consistently drawn close to 150 students each time it has been offered.

The program's benefactor, Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal of Saudi Arabia, is known for a wide range of philanthropic activities worldwide. On Dec. 12, a gift of \$20 million was given by Prince Alwaleed to expand the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. He also recently agreed to finance the construction of a new Islamic wing at the Louvre Museum in Paris, and, in 2003 Prince Alwaleed launched plans to fund construction of 10,000 housing units for poor families in Saudi Arabia. He gave a \$19 million donation to Southeast Asia's tsunami victims and made a SR20 million contribution during a live televised Saudi telethon to raise relief for the Pakistani earthquake victims in October 2005. Prince Alwaleed additionally made a \$5 million donation to establish the Center for American Studies and Research (CASAR) at the American University in Beirut (AUB) and donated \$10 million to finance the construction of the Humanities and Social Sciences (HUSS) building at the new campus of the American University in Cairo (AUC). Further, the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter, England, received a €1 million endowment from the prince. Recently, Prince Alwaleed gave a major gift to support the Dubai Harvard Foundation for Medical Research. This foundation was launched as part of a strategic partnership between Harvard Medical School's international arm, Harvard Medical International, and Dubai Healthcare City to support biomedical research and academic programs that will both advance new scientific knowledge and create a regional community of leaders in science and medicine.

## Editor's Picks



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College's applicant pool was a record 42,749



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### Microbes by the mile

Exhibit shows the beauty, utility of microscopic universe around us



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### A farewell to arms, a hello to Harvard

Iraq veteran Richard Martinez III is a freshman with deep perspective

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